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ABSTRACT

Oral history plays a vital role in accurate preservation of the rural school experience and the actual restoration of some of the country's 212,000 one-room school buildings. Oral histories provide valuable, first-hand information on who taught in and who attended one-room schools, what the curriculum included, what the building looked like, and the vital role the structure played in cementing bonds of community throughout rural America. Because thousands of people still live who taught in or attended these schools, opportunities for combining accurate, scholarly oral history with accepted preservation and restoration practices remain a special opportunity in rural preservation. Movement is afoot (throughout the United States and Canada) to save and revitalize rural schools. Local historical societies, state park commissions, the National Park Service, clubs, organizations, and private individuals are sponsoring preservation projects. Hundreds of schools have been adapted for use as houses and second homes or have become community centers, day care centers, restaurants, offices, models, art galleries, and museums. Research into a building's past adds much to the understanding and enjoyment of those rehabilitating schoolhouses for personal or adaptive use and becomes mandatory as a guide to the restoration and interpretation of a building's history when restored for museum purposes. (NEC)

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By

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Bowling Green, Ohio

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Documenting
America's Country Schools
by Andrew Gulliford

For almost 250 years the country school was the backbone of American education. As late as 1913, one-half of the schoolchildren in the United States were enrolled in the country's 212,000 one-room schools. Although only about 835 of these one-teacher, one-room schools, remain in use today, the country school continues to be a powerful cultural symbol to many Americans.

Perceptions of American country schools are clouded by two contradictory myths. One is that country schools are the poor stepchildren of American education-primitive buildings where, under intolerable conditions, young, inexperienced teachers tried to instill in their students a modicum of knowledge. Another is the myth of the little red schoolhouse pleasantly situated beneath shade trees and full of bright, young students eager to learn their lessons and please their teacher. Neither view is wholly true nor wholly false.

In some country schools, discipline was lax and learning incidental, but other schools were orderly, efficient and staunchly supported by the community, offering children an opportunity for education that few of their parents had enjoyed. Adults, too, were served by the local school. They came together at the school to hold meetings, cast ballots and participate in fund raisers and celebrations: The school housed the activities that joined people into a community, and

the identity of rural communities became inextricably linked with their schools.

Today oral history plays a significant role in the preservation of America's country schools by providing valuable, first-hand information on who taught in one-room schools, what the curriculum included, what the building looked like, and the vital role the structure played in cementing bonds of community throughout rural America. Because thousands of people still live who taught in one-room schools or who attended them, the opportunities for combining accurate, scholarly oral history with accepted preservation and restoration practices remains a very special opportunity in rural preservation.

One-room school building names reflected important beliefs and values of the community as well as the names of states, generals, presidents, animals, cities and descriptions of locales. In Douglas County, Kans., parents named schools Harmony, Apple Pie and Good Intent. Near Eagle, Colo., one school was called Bellyache School because of a cold mountain stream from which children drank. An Iowa school was named Puckerbrush and a Wyoming school Poison Spider. Other schools had names such as Brush Creek, Broken Bone, Windy Point, Dunkley, Fly Gulch, Moon Hill, Elk Head and even Barefoot Nation.

In researching country schools throughout the United States, oral history interviews and transcripts helped immensely in placing the buildings within their proper late 19th and early 20th century context. Country schools defined rural

communities; as we interviewed dozens of former pupils and teachers, oral history defined the importance of one-room schools.

Now, throughout the United States and Canada, movement is afoot to save and revitalize rural schools. Local historical societies, state park commissions, the National Park Service and numerous clubs and organizations are sponsoring preservation projects. The National Park Service has eight country schools under its aegis; two have already been meticulously restored. Capitol Reef National Park near Torrey, Utah, has a restored one-room log school. George E. Davidson, Chief, Interpretation and Information Services, writes:

> Only one oral history interview devoted totally to education has been completed, although education is referenced in many other interviews by the narrators. The material therein has added much color to our interpretive material and the voice of one teacher-narrator has been edited into a three-minute message available at the unmanned site on an on-demand continuous loop tape player.

Country schools have also become favorite projects for small historical societies with limited budgets and few if any full-time staff members. The same populist spirit that sustained pioneers in building these schools now sustains their descendants as they seek to preserve them. Hundreds of schools also have been adapted for use as houses and second homes. Others have become community centers, day care centers, restaurants, offices, art galleries and exhibits at county fairs. As with

all preservation decisions, the guidance of a 19th-century Frenchman, A. N. Didron, serves as an accepted preservation principle even today: "It is better to preserve than to repair, better to repair than to restore, better to restore than to reconstruct."

For those reasons, oral history plays a vital role in the preservation process by firmly establishing how the building was used by whom and over what period of time. Changes in the structure can often only be ascertained by thorough and comprehensive oral history interviews which give primary source information on the placement of furnishings and even the placement of the school itself.

One question that arises frequently in planning for the preservation of country schools is whether to move a school from its original site in order to save it. The rural schoolhouse was a community center shared by residents for miles around. Country schools defined the social life of rural areas and symbolized community pride in which residents from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds could participate. Thus, relocating a school building destroys its historical context, because the site is an integral part of the school's history, just as with any historic building.

On the other hand, some rural schools-at least in the Midwest and West-have a long history of mobility. In areas where schools were built of brick, stone or adobe, the schoolhouses remained rooted to the soil, but frame schools were frequently moved from place to place as the farming or mining population changed. A restored schoolhouse specifically

designed to be moved was the Bairfield School (c. 1890), originally located near Clarendon, Tex., in Donley County. Built to serve the children of cowboys, ranchers, and homesteaders, it had stone foundation supports only under the four corners of the building so that it could be easily moved as the student population shifted from ranch to ranch. Corner posts were sunk into the ground to keep the school from blowing off its underpinnings in a strong Texas wind. The school was used for both church and social activities, but the rural ranch population declined, and in 1937, when the last class was in session, it served only one student. Today, the white clapboard building is located at the Ranching Heritage Center, part of the museum at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Oral histories have been conducted with former teachers and pupils to provide a data base for the museum's interpretation of the schoolhouse.

Also in Texas, at the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Park in Johnson City, oral history played a crucial role in providing source material for the National Park Service's structure report on the one-room school attended by President Johnson. Harry O'Bryant, Superintendent of the park, states,

> Much of the information we have has come through our oral history project. Mr. Bearss interviewed 23 people [and] we have since reinterviewed many of these people as part of our ongoing oral history project. The information from these interviews will be used when the building is restored and in whatever interpretive programs are eventually installed there.

Additional oral histories on Texas rural education are being conducted by the James Gilliam Lee Library at East Texas State University. James H. Conrad, Archivist and Oral Historian, is directing the interviews with former rural school teachers, students, principals and superintendents. The ETSU Oral History staff is transcribing the interviews, and copies of the tapes, transcripts and user agreements will be deposited in the library for use by students, faculty and researchers. Sometime in fall, 1985 photographs along with excerpts from the oral history interviews will be prepared into a traveling exhibit. A similar project was undertaken by a social studies class at Panola Junior College in Carthage, Texas where history students interviewed 120 former rural school students.

Oral history is used to preserve the rural school experience, but it is also used to preserve country schools themselves. For anyone rehabilitating a historic schoolhouse-for personal use or adaptive use-research into the building's past is a fascinating project that adds much to the understanding and enjoyment of the school. But for any group restoring a school for use as an educational museum, research becomes mandatory as a guide to both the restoration and the interpretation of the building's history. Research is the foundation on which an accurate restoration and meaningful education program can be built. As Fred Schroeder points out in "Schoolhouse Reading" (History News, 1981):

> An underlying problem is that these structures are so common and undistinguished that interretation often goes no deeper than generalities. When we develop a program that begins with understanding the schoolhouse itself, however, it is possible to offer an interpretation that reflects at once the local uniqueness of the school and its place in the wider contexts of social and architectural history.

Understanding the schoolhouse itself is a prelude to restoring it properly. For vernacular schoolhouses, an examination of neighboring structures may provide clues as to the date, builders, materials and finishes of a school. Oral histories of former students and retired teachers can add in missing details especially about how the building looked or lasting effects it had on students.

Of the schools that have been moved to museum and university sites to serve as models of early schools and education techniques, the District No. 6 school (1875), now located on the Bowling Green State University campus in Bowling Green, Ohio, provides a case study in schoolhouse relocation and reconstitution. Oral histories played an important role in deciding how to furnish the re-constructed building.

Bowling Green State University is not the only college with a restored one-room schoolhouse. Country schools have been moved to Northwest Missouri State College in Maryville, Mo., Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Ky., University of Tampa, Fla., and Fort Hayes State University in Hays, Kans., where 3,000 stones from the Plymouth Schoolhouse (1874) were marked, disassembled and transported to campus with volunteer

labor and financial support from Phi Delta Kappa. Over sixty former rural school teachers have been interviewed at Fort Hays State, and those oral histories will soon be published by the University Press of Kansas.

Another exceptional restored stone school is the Monroe Schoolhouse (c. 1819) in Hardyston Township near Hamburg, New Jersey. As part of the school's careful restoration and to be certain of fidelity to the original floor plan, Carrie Papa, director of the Monroe Schoolhouse Museum, recorded 26 oral histories given by local school graduates. She collected them in the pamphlet, "Stones and Stories: An Oral History of the Old Monroe School" (1980). Carrie Papa learned a great deal about the school's interior as well as its role in the community. A student who attended the school in 1912 provided many details of the interior:

> As you walked into the school, there were three rows of double seats and desks facing the door. The low seats and desks were first for the little kids. The seats gradually got larger until they reached the back of the room where the biggest ones were. They were plain wood with the seat and desk together, and there was a shelf underneath for books.
>
> The teacher's desk was just inside the door to the left. In the middle of the wall behind the teacher's desk was a big blackboard--there were blackboards on the sides, too. Above the front blackboard was a picture of George Washington. The flag was there, too. On the far side of the blackboard was a big Seth Thomas clock. I used to put my knee against the desk to hold one of those old willow rulers. Then I'd chew

> up a wad of paper, shoot it off the ruler and fasten it on the clock. But if we got too rowdy, Miss B. would send us out to cut down our own hickory stick. Then we got it.

"Descriptions of the school's interior and furnishings guided the restoration work," said Carrie Papa. "Memories provide a genuine interpretation of the exhibit."

The successful collaboration of oral history and preservation continues. At Historic Fort Missoula, Missoula, Montana, the Schoolhouse Research Committee conducted fifty interviews as an integral part of the Grant Creek one-room schoolhouse restoration. From the recollections of the Grant Creek people, a seventy-page book was compiled, in the words of one of the volunteers, "to be used as a guide in making our school restoration as authentic as possible."

Oral history plays a vital role in accurate preservation and restoration projects particularly in the restoration of rural vernacular structures built by community members. No rural building type in America better exemplifies the variety of vernacular building styles than one-room country schools, and no historical methodolgy does a more effective job of aiding rural preservation than the judicious use of oral history.